



Photo: Kalleen Mortenson

What exactly is merit?

Gyume Khensur (Lobsang Tenzin) Rinpoche spoke to students at Maitripa Institute in Portland, Oregon in late 2006. One of the students, frustrated by how the term “merit” seemed to be loosely thrown around in Buddhist circles, asked Rinpoche the following question ...

Question: What exactly is meant by the term “merit”? For example, if I practice the merit of generosity, is it considered merit because it lessens my karmic tendency toward greed, or does it actually change the conditions of my life in some way?

Answer: Merit, in general, means everything which is virtuous. And you can have all kinds of virtue. When we talk about the result of happiness in our life, you can have all kinds of happiness or well-being. For example, when we talk about being very affluent in one’s material resources, when we look at what is the specific meritorious cause for that, it is the virtue of generosity. Again, when we talk about generosity, that doesn’t mean that we have to have something to give. Generosity is a wish to give – that is generosity. The more we empower, enhance this mind, wishing to give, wanting to give, that is the merit of generosity. But on the other hand, it doesn’t mean you think, “Oh, generosity is just my wish to give, but I’m not actually physically going to give anything.” The mind has to be applicable.

On the other hand, the teachings say that if you get rid of miserliness in one’s way of thinking or action, this does not complete the perfection of generosity. What is miserliness? Miserliness is an afflicted state of mind, an obscuration of delusions or afflictions. When you look at the Arhats who have rid themselves of the obscuration of delusions and therefore have rid themselves of miserliness, they haven’t achieved the perfection of generosity. In the practice of the perfection of generosity, you have generosity of one’s body, one’s possessions, and one’s merit – one’s

roots of virtue. These are the substances that we can give away in general, but the important thing is enhancing that mind which wishes to give.

When we look, we find four types of giving: the giving of material things, the giving of dharma teachings, the giving of love or kindness toward others, and the giving of protection from states of fear. If we can embody all these types of giving, then that is great. In order to be blessed with material resources in future lifetimes, never to be in lack of material resources, what is the merit that ensures that? It is generosity. That is, the specific merit that brings forth that result. In order to attain higher rebirth, what is the specific merit? It is ethics. And then also, there is merit which is accumulated through the substances that we give, such as the building of temples and monasteries, the printing of scriptures, through enabling learning, enabling positive qualities in others; based on [and relative to] these items or substances, you have the merit of generosity. ☸

Gyume Khensur (Lobsang Tenzin) Rinpoche is one of the most respected scholar-adepts in the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. He is the retired Abbot of Gyume Tantric Monastery in South India. Rinpoche currently serves as one of the primary teachers at Sera Monastery, where he has thousands of disciples, and has taught in the United States and Europe.

Translated by Ven. Thubten (Tsenla) Dekyong and lightly edited by Mandala staff.

To submit a question for the “Ask a Lama” series, write to Associate Editor Sara Blumenthal at: sara@fpmt.org.